



A free phonenumber of hymns,
reflections and prayers



CONNECTIONS

Text of reflections and prayers for Hymns We Love

THINE BE THE GLORY! (USED ON THE FIRST DAY ONLY)

Imagine the scene 2,000 years ago. Early on that first Easter Sunday morning, the followers of Jesus were devastated and hidden away, fearful of what lay ahead. All their hopes for a wonderful future seemed shattered because Jesus, their master and teacher from God, in whom they had put their faith and their hope, whom they had loved and followed, was now dead.

Early that morning, the disciples Peter & John were together when suddenly Mary Magdalene arrived shouting that someone had moved Jesus' body but she didn't know where. Peter and John immediately ran to the tomb and there they found the folded grave clothes where the Jesus' body should have been. and although John believed something special had happened, Peter was just even more confused.

Certainly neither Mary, Peter nor John at this point could respond with the sense of victory and joy with which we have just sung, but over the coming hours their encounters with the risen Jesus took each of them on a journey from a place of utter despair and grief, to one of joy, filled with confidence, faith and hope for a future to be spent with the risen Jesus.

And this is journey that Edmond Budry, who wrote this wonderful, inspiring hymn, takes us on today. From the empty tomb with the rolled away stone and folded grave clothes, through Jesus' appearance to the disciples in the locked room where he scatters their fear and gloom - to his promise, as our Glorious Prince of Life, to bring us safe through Jordan to our home above - through the trials and challenges of life to an eternity safe by his side.

Edmond Budry was born in Vevey, in Switzerland in 1854. Vevey is a small, pretty town on the shores of Lake Geneva and has been home to Charlie Chaplin, the writer Graham Greene and actor James Mason, amongst many others. More pertinently perhaps at this time of year, it was also here in the 1870's that a man named Henri Nestle helped invent milk chocolate.

But whilst milk chocolate was being developed in his home town, Edmond Budry had moved to nearby Lausanne to study theology, becoming a Free Church Pastor at the age of 27, before returning a few years later to Vevey where he remained a pastor until 1923, retiring 9 years before his death aged 78. He wrote and translated a number of hymns, but this is by far his most famous, which he wrote specifically to go with this wonderful rousing tune, composed by George Handel 140 years earlier.

Budry knew that the resurrection of Jesus is at the centre of the Christian faith, without it his belief would be meaningless. Saint Paul himself said “if Christ did not rise from the dead... then our trust in God is worthless” but equally, if Jesus did rise from the dead on that first Easter Morning, the implications are breathtaking and everything the Bible says about Jesus is true: God can be trusted, forgiveness is possible, death is defeated and heaven is attainable.

And that is why the reality of seeing and knowing a risen Jesus so transformed the lives of the disciples that morning and that's why we, and they, can sing so confidently

“Endless is the victory, Thou o'er death hast won”

But as we just reflected, the journey that first Easter Morning didn't start so confidently. Since the trauma of his public & agonising death on Friday afternoon, everything now appeared lost to the followers of Jesus. Grieving, fearful and defeated they were not expecting a miracle and weren't ready for one. But Jesus came gently and personally to each of the them that day, meeting them at their point of need and turning their grief into joy, their fear into confidence and their defeat into victory.

Mary was the first to see Jesus. She had lingered outside the tomb when Peter and John returned to Jerusalem. We don't know why she stayed, perhaps she just wanted to be near the last place she had seen Jesus, but we do know that this is where Jesus comes to her, on her own, and gently speaks her name. “Mary”.

She immediately recognises his voice, turns towards him and cries out “Teacher”. It was not until Jesus speaks her name that Mary recognises him. But the moment he does she knows its him, because His voice is full of love for her. Sometimes seeing is not believing... Loving is.

The disciples also needed to encounter Jesus that day... and to see him. So, although Mary is sent by Jesus to tell them all that had just happened – the

apostle to the apostles as she is often called - they all, including Peter and John, seem to struggle to believe her story and we find them that evening still fearful and hiding behind locked doors.

And this is where Jesus comes and stands among them. He doesn't tell them off for their lack of belief, or for not understanding all his teaching over the previous 3 years, he simply greets them "Peace be with you" and then he shows them his wounded hands and side.

Whilst Mary just needed to hear her name, the disciples needed a bit more, they needed to see Jesus, they needed him to show them his scars and to hear his voice. And Jesus meets them exactly where they were at.

They didn't need to leave their room, they didn't need to resolve their questions and fears, they didn't need to go to the temple or follow a religious programme. Instead Jesus came to them in their weakness and fear, just as they were.

And as they saw and experienced the risen Jesus, so their fear and despair disintegrated and were replaced with astonishment and delight. As we just sung:

"Lovingly he greets us, scatters fear and gloom"

And what about you and I? I suspect that many of us may feel a bit like the disciples at the moment. For very different reasons we are also locked inside our houses, shut off from the world around us, possibly feeling lonely, isolated and fearful.

But the story of Easter assures us that the risen Jesus still wants to come to you and to me, to stand before us, to speak our name, to show us his love - demonstrated through his scars from the cross - and to gently call us to believe and to follow.

He is not deterred by our questions or our doubts, he will meet us just where we are. Over the coming days we will explore together who Jesus is through 5 well-loved hymns and I would love it if you came on that journey with me. Together we will find a risen Jesus who is not afraid of our doubts or our fears, but who calls us by name, who shows, who explains, who welcomes and who forgives.

And if we place our trust in the risen Jesus, put our lives in his nail-scarred hands, he will scatter our fears and gloom, he will aid us in our strife and bring us safe through Jordan to our home above.....and then together we can proclaim

“Thine be the glory, Risen conquering Son, Endless is the victory, Thou o'er death hast won”

Closing Prayer

Dear Lord

Thank you that no matter where I am today, you are able to find me, to come by my side and to call me by my name. Thank you that you are not put off by my doubts, anger, or fears but will always welcome me, just as I am.

Help me now to put my trust in you, knowing that being held in your arms is the safest place to be in this time of trouble.

I ask Lord that over the coming days you would help me draw close to you, listen to your voice and come to know just how much you love me.

In the name of Jesus I pray.

Amen

HOW GREAT THOU ART

30 years ago this April, the Hubble Space Telescope was launched with a mission to explore the furthest reaches of the universe. Immediately it began to change our view of the cosmos, capturing new stars and details that were impossible to see from earth.

However, no-one was prepared for what happened at the end of 1995. Over the Christmas holidays that year, the Institute director, Robert Williams, decided to use the 10-day break to point the telescope at a tiny, black, apparently empty, patch of sky no bigger than the size of a grain of sand held at arm's length.

When the team returned after Christmas and looked at the images it had captured, they were astonished – there was no empty black patch of space, they found not one or two new stars, but hundreds and hundreds of galaxies, each one containing billions of stars.

As a result of this discovery astronomers are now confident that there are trillions of galaxies each one with billions of stars and that the universe is far bigger and more glorious than we ever could have imagined.

As Professor Jim Al-Khalili, the well-known theoretical physicist and broadcaster said “it is impossible not to ... be intimidated by the extraordinary depth of the cosmos”

Now Carl Boberg, who wrote today's wonderful hymn, didn't have the benefit of knowing all that the Hubble telescope has shown us, but he still knew how to find wonder in creation.

Carl was born the son of a carpenter in Sweden in 1859. He started out as a sailor, and you can imagine how at night, out on the northern seas, he might have looked up at the stars and wondered just how they came to be there.

After the sea, he went to bible school and later became a member of the Swedish parliament. He published many poems, hymns and songs but this is easily his most famous.

He saw a universe of beauty, power and wonder, and in that recognised the fingerprints of a beautiful, powerful and wonderful God... a God so great he could create trillions of stars with, as the Bible tells us, just the power of his Word.

But he also saw a God who was interested in the detail, the forest glades through which he wandered, the birds singing sweetly in the trees. A God who not only knows every star, but lovingly created every tree, every leaf, who is so absorbed in the beauty and detail of life on earth, who finds joy in bird song just as we do.

But here's the funny thing – the bible tells us little about HOW these wonders we've been singing about were created - it deals with the creation of billions of galaxies and trillions of stars with just 10 words

"in the beginning God created the heavens and the earth" and then adds the throwaway line 'and he also made the stars..'

You may have read the Bible, or you may not even own one. Either way its clear that those who wrote it are not really very interested in the hows of creation... that's what science is for, and the Bible was never meant to be a science textbook.

Instead the Bible is much more interested in the who and the why - Who is this creator God?, What is His character like?, Why did he make us?

Maybe you can remember some of the Old Testament bible stories like Adam and Eve, Joseph and that dreamcoat of his, Moses and the Exodus or the ten commandments.

Well I would suggest that when you put all of the stories together they can be summarised as saying just two things:

Firstly they help us understand just how big, how powerful, but also how Holy the God who created the stars is....

But secondly, they then reassure us that this great awesome God, actually loves us and wants to be in relationship with us.

Let's just think about the first theme for a moment. In one sense it's obvious... if there really is a Creator God, He has to be utterly different from us – this is part of the meaning of the term "Holy" which literally means "set apart".

The book of Isaiah says:

“For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways” declares the Lord, “For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts”

Again, if we think about it, this makes sense, because if God wasn't holy, set-apart, perfect, then he wouldn't really be God!

Let's imagine for the moment you and I are standing in New York, looking at the Empire State Building, and on the side of it someone has painted a scale from bottom to top where they have ranked every human who has ever lived in terms of how well they lived (how good they were).

Now, if you were doing that, who would you put at the top? Maybe Mother Teresa, Nelson Mandela?

...and at the bottom? perhaps Hitler or Stalin

And with that as the range, where do you think you fit in? Somewhere near the top? Or maybe a bit lower.

Finally having done all that, where should God be on the scale? Well, I guess He has to be above even the 'best' human, so maybe at cloud level, or maybe the moon. Well the bible tells us he is far beyond that, infinitely further than even the Hubble telescope can see.

“For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways”

God isn't just a slightly better version of humans. The truth is that the whole range from the very worst of humanity to very best doesn't even register on the scale of God's goodness.

The gap is so big, there is no way you or I, by our own efforts, can ever close it. We are human, and, as one of our poets said, 'to be human is to err'. Even those whose lives we most admire will acknowledge their own selfishness, or in Bible terms that old fashioned word "sin".

It might not be that popular – for all sorts of reasons. But our difference from God isn't simply about scale – it's about our goodness. And actually I have never met a human being who – when being honest and candid – won't

admit that the heart of the human problem is the problem of the human heart.

So many wars, so much environmental calamity, the recent economic crashes, our relationship and family difficulties – all these have, at their root and cause, an element of human selfishness be they individual or collective. And we have proved ourselves incapable of ridding ourselves of it.

Now, if we were to stop there that would be bad news. But there is good news... God never stops there.

Those Old Testament Stories of Abraham, of Moses, of David are all about God finding a group of people to get to know him and for God to teach about who he was and how he loved them, so they could pass it onto others.

Now if you do read your way through all of the old testament, you will find out that they were not always very good at that, and time after time they go wrong and lose the plot. But you and they are never out of God's reach.

God didn't mess up choosing them, because despite all of their failings, God kept loving and longing for relationship and wouldn't be persuaded otherwise and so he comes himself in Jesus.

And coming back to today's hymn, Carl Boberg saw the same link as he moves seamlessly from the wonders of creation in verse 2 to the story of Jesus and the cross in verse 3. 'and when I think that God his son not sparing, sent him to die, I scarce can take it in....'

And that is the wonderful story of God's love for you and me that we remember every Easter and which we will explore a little bit more tomorrow when we will sing Rock of Ages.

But first let's sing again about the wonders of creation, the wonders of a holy God who loves you and me and together proclaim "My God, How Great Thou Art!"

Closing Prayer

Dear Lord

Thank you that you are a powerful, great God who created the entire universe and trillions of stars with just the power of your word.}

Thank you also that you love the beauty and detail of life, taking joy in peaceful forest glades and exquisite bird song as well as in the splendour of the lofty mountains.

Thank you that most of all you find joy and love in your relationship with us, your people.

Help me to know your love, to experience your joy and to see the world around me, and people around me, as you do.

As I listen to the Hymns We Love series this week, please help me to take a step closer to you each day to see you more clearly, love you more dearly and follow you more nearly, day by day. Amen

ROCK OF AGES

If you search for “Rock of Ages” on a computer the first thing that comes up is, not the hymn we just sang, but the 2012 musical starring Tom Cruise. It’s strapline promises “Nothin’ but a good time”.

That is probably not the first phrase that comes to mind when thinking about this hymn. It is a big, weighty hymn – in fact it can feel a bit serious and downbeat, but I hope as we look at it today, we will come to see that it actually shows something amazing about God’s character.

In many ways it is not dissimilar to its writer. Augustus Toplady, was a complex individual and not easy to get to know.

He was gentle, humble, caring, loved by his parishioners but also a bit of a loner who became embroiled in a bitter theological dispute, which for many years tainted his reputation.

Born in Farnham in 1740, his father was a major in the Royal Marines, but tragically died just 5 months after Augustus was born. Augustus grew up an only child and formed a pretty solitary figure for much of his short life, dying when he was just 38.

He found faith as a teenager, was ordained and initially served as a curate in Blagdon, Somerset, close to Cheddar Gorge. And, if you believe the sign painted on the rocks in nearby Burrington Combe, it was here, as he sheltered from a violent storm, that the inspiration for Rock of Ages came to him and he quickly scribbled the words down on the back of a playing card.

It’s a wonderful, romantic story, but sadly untrue! – in fact his inspiration was a verse from the book of Isaiah “Trust in the Lord forever, For the Lord our Lord is a Rock of Ages”

Yesterday, we immersed ourselves in the celebrated hymn “How Great Thou Art” and explored God as the Creator of an amazing, complex and vast universe discovering how his greatness and goodness are precisely what makes him worthy of praise. But even more wonderfully that he had sent Jesus to live with us, die for us on the cross, and rise from the tomb on that first Easter Sunday for our salvation.

And it is the cross that is at the centre of this hymn and what we will look at

today. But before we do that, let's just consider for a moment who this Jesus was and what we can know about him?

Well the first thing is, there can be no doubt that he was real. There really was a man, called Jesus, who lived 2,000 years ago and 2,000 miles away from here, who claimed to be a prophet and who was executed & died on a cross under the Romans. The evidence for this is overwhelming, not just from Christians, but also from Jewish and Roman writers and records at the time.

So the question we need to ask ourselves, is not whether he existed ... but who he actually was.....

If you ask many people in this country who Jesus was, they will probably say he was a good man, a moral teacher who taught about love and how to live a good life.

And they are absolutely right.... to a point, because if we look carefully at what Jesus said about himself, I don't think he ever intended us to draw that conclusion.

He is someone who said "I am the light of the world", "I am the resurrection" "I am the way, the truth and the life"..... he wasn't claiming to be a signpost but to BE the way, not simply to offer a perspective on truth but to BE the truth.

The other thing about Jesus is that for all his teachings and for all the quality of his life, his primary focus, and the focus of the new testament and of Christians down the ages has not been so much on his life, but on his suffering, death and resurrection.

Have you ever thought what an odd symbol the cross is?. We wear it round our necks, it is the shape of most churches, many people make the sign of it when they pray.

But if I was talking to you today wearing a guillotine or a model electric chair round my neck, you would rightly think I'm rather odd... and yet we think nothing of wearing a symbol of probably the most brutal and cruel form of execution ever invented.

So why do Christians focus so much on the cross? Why are almost 1/3 of the gospels – the accounts of Jesus' life - about his death? The answer is that

Christians believe it is through, and only through, Jesus death, and his subsequent resurrection, that relationship with God can be restored.

It is at the Cross where Christianity is shown to be different to every other religion. God comes and makes the human condition his own, taking all the consequences of it on to himself. Dying so we can live, suffering alone so we never have to and taking our judgment so we can be free.

Christianity confronts straight on the seriousness of sin. It shows it is impossible to overstate the consequences of that in terms of our relationship with a holy God, with each other and with his world and it makes clear that humans cannot solve that problem by themselves.

It was Saint Anselm, Archbishop of Canterbury in the 12th century who said "Only man SHOULD pay for his sins, since it was he who was in default, Only God COULD make this payment, since it was he who demanded it"

And it's this that Augustus Toplady makes so clear in our hymn today.

Not the labour of my hands Can fulfil Thy law's demands;

No matter how hard we try, we can never meet God's standards, we can't ever be good enough or do enough - that Gap is just too big

Could my zeal no respite know, Could my tears forever flow,

Also it doesn't matter how hard we try, how good our intentions are or how sorry we are

All for sin could not atone; Thou must save, and Thou alone

in the end Toplady says that everything has to come from God, only God can rescue us.

And so he concludes that we are utterly helpless before God

Nothing in my hand I bring, simply to your cross I cling

Naked come to you for dress, helpless look to you for grace

Foul I to the fountain fly, wash me saviour or I die.

Does this all sound somewhat downbeat? I certainly think many people assume this hymn is rather depressing ... but I don't think this is what Toplady thought

You see whilst at the cross I cannot escape my emptiness, NEITHER can I escape that God loved me and you so much that he paid the ultimate price to bring us back into relationship with him.

On one level the cross shows us to be helpless, naked and lost, but within this Jesus death reveals that you and I are, in fact, PRICELESS because God did everything, He gave it all, paying the highest price to redeem us, to buy us back, to rescue us.

And this is the unimaginable value that God places on you and I.

And isn't that wonderful? If we were involved in our own salvation we could never really be sure if we were good enough, or had done enough.

I can't even keep to the speed limit. If I had to rely on myself to be good enough for God I would be on pretty shaky ground

Instead, the rescue plan has been completely finished by Jesus and is Rock solid. God is our Rock of Ages - all we need to do is say "thank you" and accept the most wonderful gift

This is what Augustus Toplady did – and he found in Christ one who – whatever the storms of life – offered him an unchanging, utterly faithful and true saviour. No wonder he wanted to hide himself in this God. So let's listen again and sing along to Rock of Ages, reflecting on the wonderful love that drove God's rescue plan for you and me.

Closing Prayer

The theologian Emil Bruner wrote that the Cross is the only place where the loving, forgiving, merciful, God is revealed in such a way that we see, that his holiness, and his love, are both equally infinite.

Dear God

Thank you that you chose to pour out your love for me. That through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, you pick me up, wash me clean and make me whole.

Thank you, Lord that all of this was done by Jesus and none of it depends on how good, or how bad, I have been. You love me regardless, and I am priceless in your eyes.

Help me now, to know and accept your kind and wonderful gift of forgiveness.

In the name of Jesus I pray.

Amen

AMAZING GRACE

According to Jerry Bailey, of Broadcast Music, Amazing Grace “may be the most recorded song on the planet”. It has been recorded nearly 7,000 times by people as diverse as Elvis Presley, Aretha Franklin, the Royal Scots Dragoon Guards and even the Lemonheads!!

But what is it about this hymn, written nearly 250 years ago by a Buckinghamshire clergyman called John Newton, that makes it so popular today. ?

Maybe it's because it speaks so simply and eloquently about a life turned around and a hope still to come. It tells us that Jesus was not just saving us FROM something but was saving us FOR something.

And perhaps the best way to explore what this could be is to have a look at one of Jesus best known stories - the parable of the Prodigal son.

It's the story of a rich man who had two sons, and one day the younger one comes to his father & asks for all his inheritance, half of everything the father owns. His father gives it to him but instead of using it sensibly the son runs off and squanders the whole lot on wild living.

Eventually the money runs out and he goes through a terrible time ending up completely destitute and starving.

Jesus tells that at this low point he finally comes to his senses and realises that even his father's servants are better off than him, and though he has blown his chance as a son, perhaps he could go back and work for his father as a servant, then at least he would be fed and have a place to sleep.

So he heads off home. And this is how Jesus describes what happens next in chapter 15 of Luke's gospel.

“When he was still a long way off, his father saw him. His heart pounding, he ran out, embraced him, and kissed him. The son started his speech: ‘Father, I've sinned against God, I've sinned before you; I don't deserve to be called your son ever again.’

“But the father wasn't listening. He was calling to the servants, ‘Quick. Bring a clean set of clothes and dress him. Put the family ring on his finger and

sandals on his feet. Then get the best heifer and roast it. We're going to feast! We're going to have a wonderful time! My son is here — given up for dead and now alive! Given up for lost and now found!' And they began to have a wonderful time.

You see, the father wasn't in the slightest bit interested in just rescuing his son from the mess he was in.... he wanted FAR MORE, he loved his son so much that he wanted to totally restore him to the place he was before it all went wrong.

That's why he put the family ring of authority on his finger and that's why they had such a huge party....

And THAT is what Grace is. It is free, extravagant, and costly to the giver.

God doesn't want to just rescue us from our mess, he wants to share his riches with us, to restore us to our place as his children with all that that entails.

And John Newton, who wrote today's hymn, really understood what it meant to be taken on that journey by God, as I think it fair to say, that he tested the story of the prodigal son to its extreme.

The son of a merchant navy captain, John's mother died when he was 7 and understandably maybe, he became very unruly. He was sacked from his first job and at 19 was press ganged into the navy. He deserted, was caught, flogged and eventually began working on the slave ships taking captured slaves from Africa to the Caribbean to be sold as property.

Here his behaviour grew even worse, he beat people, raped women and behaved utterly appallingly. He ended up reduced to rags, put in chains and begging for food.

He was eventually rescued and was heading back to England by ship when he encountered a massive storm. The ship he was travelling in was badly damaged and close to sinking.

As Newton struggled at the wheel of the ship, expecting to die, his mind turned to his childhood and the stories of God he'd heard from his mother and for the first time in his life he wondered if those stories might actually be true.

Well the ship survived the night and incredibly a further 4 weeks at sea, eventually drifting in to Ireland with all supplies gone. Newton was convinced that it was only God who had saved him and there and then vowed to follow God for the rest of his life.

But things were not that straight forward. Though he tried hard to become a better person, to read his bible and even stop swearing, he continued to work in the slave trade and on his very next trip to Sierra Leone, quickly fell back into the absolute worst of all his old ways, seemingly powerless to stop himself.

He then caught a terrible fever and as he lay sick, despair utterly overwhelmed him. He realised he was even worse than the prodigal son because he had his chance to return and had thrown it away, he had effectively rejected God twice, so surely there was no way back for him now.

He ended up crawling to a remote corner of the island he was staying on and there in his own words "cast himself before his Lord, who should do with him as he pleased"

He had reached such a low that he no longer cared what happened to him, all he could do was throw himself on God's mercy without even much hope of an answer.

There was no sudden flash of light, but afterwards he was always clear that this was the point where everything changed. He recovered his strength, returned to England, got married and began to rebuild his life.

Just 8 years later he applied to become an Anglican priest, but not surprisingly it took a further 7 years before he was actually accepted!

But he did eventually become vicar of Olney in Buckinghamshire where he set up a regular Thursday evening prayer service. It was his habit to write a weekly hymn for this and so it was in 1772 no doubt reflecting on the journey of his life that he wrote the hymn Amazing Grace.

To finish his story, he had by this point realised the evils of the slave trade and joined the anti-slavery campaign, working with and supporting William Wilberforce and then finally, just 9 months before he died in 1807 the Abolition of the Slave Trade Act was passed.

You can therefore see that when he wrote “Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me” he really knew what he was talking about. He knew what God had rescued him FROM and could also see what God had rescued him FOR.

He could see that it was God's grace, God's endless love and forgiveness that kept him safe through many dangers, toils and snares.

But he also could see that God had gone so much further than just rescuing him, so much further than only forgiving him, he had completely restored him to the place he was always meant to be: close to God, bright shining as the sun, in full and loving relationship.... And this is Amazing Grace.

Just like the father in the story of the prodigal son, God had not only shown him mercy, he had lavished him with Grace.

God's grace is extravagant, it is illogical, it is underserved, it is unnecessary..... but it is also utterly wonderful.

And that is grace. And when we recognise how undeserved it is, and how beautiful and strong it is, it leaves us amazed. No wonder this hymn is loved by so many people...

Closing Prayer

Dear Lord

Thank you that no matter how far I wander, you will always be there waiting, like the father in the story of the prodigal son, ready to run towards me with your arms open wide, to pick me up, hug me and welcome me back to be at your side.

Thank you that the life of John Newton shows how this is true even for those of us who feel so undeserving.

Lord, maybe for the first or for the thousandth time, I turn to you now and say I am sorry for all that I have done wrong, please forgive me, wash me clean and take me back into your arms.

I ask this in the name of Jesus and in confidence that you hear me and love me.

Amen

THE LORD'S MY SHEPHERD

If you have been listening to our series on Hymns We Love, you will know that yesterday we looked at Amazing Grace and saw how God lavishes us with his extraordinary love, grace, and hope, giving us so much more than we could ever deserve and so much more than we could have ever dreamed of.

However, if we are honest, there are times in all our lives, and never more so than in this current crisis, when we may not feel “very lavished” when love, hope and grace feel a long, long way away.

For every one of us there will be times in our journey through life that are difficult and full of pain, and ever more so as we get older: Failing health, loneliness and isolation, the death of friends and loved ones, the fear of own death and future. These are all very real challenges that we will face at some point,

And for 3,000 years in such times of struggle, people have turned to Psalm 23, for comfort, guidance and support.

The hymn we've just listened to is actually just a 17th Century translation of the original Hebrew scriptures. The Psalm itself was written by King David of Israel, about 1,000 years before Jesus was born.

David was the greatest King Israel ever had, he was powerful, victorious in battle and loved by his people. He was the 25 x great grandfather of Joseph, the father of Jesus and, as well as being king, was a significant spiritual leader.

But David wasn't always a sophisticated, handsome, psalm writing king - he started life as Shepherd boy, looking after his father's sheep. And this psalm draws on all his experience as a shepherd following the journey through a year in the life of a shepherd and his sheep.

It starts at home, where the sheep can relax in green pastures, feeding beside still waters, where every need is carefully supplied, and the sheep are safe and well fed.

But as the summer heat comes, the grass withers and streams dry out, so the shepherd needs to lead his sheep up into the mountains to the high pastures, where the grass is better.

And the journey there, through the dark valleys, up the mountainsides can be hazardous with wolves, bears and lions to fend off.

But when the sheep get to the high plateaus or table lands as they are called, they will find the shepherd has already prepared the grass for them, and it will sustain them through the hot summer, while the shepherd will protect them from predators with his rod and staff.

Then, once summer turns to autumn, the shepherd will lead his sheep back home for the winter months and back to safety.

And in the same way God, our Good Shepherd, looks after us....

Let's notice 3 things

Firstly, the good shepherd daily cares for and protects his sheep.

Secondly, the good shepherd travels every step of the journey with his sheep

And finally, the good shepherd leads his sheep back to his home where they are safe and looked after for ever.

The book of Isaiah says "[God] tends his flock like a shepherd: he gathers the lambs in his arms and carries them close to his heart"

This is exactly the picture of daily love and care that David sees as he writes this psalm.

God is his Shepherd and He is our shepherd. He created and redeemed you and I. He loves us as his own, just like the shepherd owns and cares for his sheep

But just as God is like the shepherd, so we are like sheep & often in need of some shepherding!

Of all domesticated animals, sheep are the least able to look after

themselves. They have no defence against predators, they cannot find their own food, they are susceptible to endless bugs and infections. They can't even shed their own fur without the help of the shepherd. They are also known for making some very poor decisions that leave them in trouble.

It is not that uncommon for example, for a slightly overweight sheep to find a nice comfy hollow to lie in. But as it snuggles down, its centre of gravity can move and suddenly none of its feet are touching the ground. It's then stuck. Shepherd's refer to this as the sheep being cast, stuck on its back with its legs waving in the air and unable to get up....

Now, whilst this might appear funny to us, it can be rather serious for the sheep... without getting too biological, gasses can build up in its stomach, the blood supply is cut off from its legs and it rapidly gets weaker and weaker. If left alone it will die.

But if a shepherd finds a cast down sheep, he can't just put it upright and walk away. He must turn it gently, rubbing its legs to bring the blood supply back and rubbing its stomach to let the gases go down and then support it until it is steady enough to walk by itself.

I think this is a wonderful picture of how God, our Shepherd, cares for us.

Like sheep, we will often look for the comfy hollow to settle in, choosing the easy life, rather than following the shepherd.

We can get distracted and lost down the cul-de-sacs of life... but God is the wonderful shepherd who daily comes and picks us up, puts us gently on our feet, and returns us to his flock. As the psalm says, He restores our soul.

As we know, life is a journey and there will be times when things are not easy - we find ourselves in a dark place, where we can't see where we are going and where we are afraid. And here the psalm promises us that God is by our side journeying with us.

To get to the better pastures the Shepherd can't take the sheep along the ridges because the ground is too steep. Instead he must take them up the narrow, deep and dark valleys.

BUT in these valleys the sheep can't see where they are going, it is dark, there are predators, so they have no choice but trust to the wisdom and protection of their shepherd.

In the same way David promises that God will be there to lead us through the dark times when we cannot see where we are going or what may be coming up from behind.

David does not say he walks IN the valley of shadow of death but THROUGH it. The sheep go through the valleys either on their way to the fresh grass of the high plateaus, or on their way back home.

Like them, we will never stay permanently in the valleys, God will lead us out - either to a better place here, or to our ultimate home, but either way he promises to always walk with us.

The other thing you may notice when you look at the psalm and hymn, is that it starts in the third person, "The Lord is my Shepherd" "He makes me lie down" "He leads me", "he guides me" but as soon as we have passed through the valleys the psalm turns to first person "you are with me" "your rod comforts me" "you anoint my head".

God never promises to insulate us from the hard times in life, but he does promise to be with us through them. and if we stick with him through these times then our relationship with him will deepen and strengthen.

Finally, David promises that God will lead us home. *"Surely your goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever"*

Ultimately our journey through life will end. Whatever green pastures or dark valleys we are travelling through will finish and there God promises to be with us and to take us safely home.

In saving us on the Cross, Jesus didn't just save us for a better life here and now, but for an eternity with God.

Now picturing what that might be like is not easy. The thought of sitting on a cloud strumming a harp for ever doesn't fill most of us with joy.

So what can we actually know about eternity?

Well we know it will be physical and not so dissimilar to what is around us now. The bible talks about a new earth, one like this one but perfect. It will therefore be much the same as living on earth, but also totally different, with no pain, no death, no tears.

CS Lewis expresses it brilliantly. At the end of *The Last Battle*, the finale of his Narnia books, that world is drawn to an end and as they look forward to what happens next CS Lewis says this:

“And for us this is the end of all the stories, and we can most truly say that they all lived happily ever after. But for them it was only the beginning of the real story. All their life in this world and all their adventures in Narnia had only been the cover and the title page: now at last they were beginning Chapter One of the Great Story which no one on earth has read: which goes on for ever: in which every chapter is better than the one before.”

As we each head towards life with God forever we can know and trust that our Good Shepherd will be there with us and will lead us safely to his home. So put your life in his hands again and trust his love. He has promised to protect us every step of the way, no matter how easy or how dark the valley, he will be with us for ever and our hope will never fail.

Closing Prayer

In the book of Romans, Chapter 8, Saint Paul says this:-

“I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

Heavenly Father, thank you that you are MY good shepherd, that you are by my side through the best times but also through the darkest of valleys, when life feels too hard, you promise never to leave me.

And now, in the midst of this coronavirus, please draw close. Lead me, protect me, care for me and sustain me. I trust that you will lead me through these dark and uncertain times and will be by my side, whatever happens, for now and for ever more.

In Jesus name.

Amen

AND CAN IT BE?

Today we reach the end of our short journey looking at the Christian faith through 5 of our most loved hymns.

Don't worry if you've not been with us for the whole week, these sessions will be repeated again next week so please feel free to call back then.

Our hymn today is an answer to the question what does it actually mean to follow and trust this God? How do we respond to a God who is, on the one hand, the Holy Creator of the universe, and on the other our very personal rescuer and redeemer. A God of power and might, who also lavishes us with grace and love and longs to guide and comfort us through every step of our journey through life.

Well, I think in answering this we can learn a lot from today's hymn and its writer.

And Can it be! was written by Charles Wesley in 1738. Charles, and his older brother John, are best known as the founders of the Methodist church and the leaders of what is now known as the Great Awakening, a huge revival of Christianity in the mid 17 hundreds.

John Wesley was the more famous as a preacher, but it was Charles who wrote the hymns. And boy did he write hymns, around 6,500 in total, that's 2 ½ a week, every week for 50 years. Week in, week out with no breaks!

But his parents were also not lacking in energy ... Charles was the 18th of 19 children produced by Susanna and Samuel Wesley. And rather than be totally exhausted by this achievement, they still found time for Samuel to be a parish priest, writer and poet and for Susanna to teach all their children at home so proficiently that by the time they were 11 they were virtually fluent in both Latin and Greek and also knew large sections of the New Testament by heart.

Frankly, I really don't know what I've been doing for most of my life to have achieved so little in comparison!

But this work ethic was then reflected in the way Charles and John went about their Christian lives.

At university Charles set up what became known as the Holy Club. It was a group of students who were almost fanatical in their pursuit of living a devout Christian life. They met for 3 hours every day for prayer and study and still made sure they made time to pray outside of this in every single hour they were awake.

They were earnest and honourable but fell into the age-old mistake of thinking their behaviour could earn and improve their salvation. They were so rigid that people mocked them for following such strict, unbending methods, and so soon they began to be called - Methodists - a term which stuck with them for their rest of their lives.

However, Charles knew that for all the outward piety, something was still missing internally. For all his efforts he hadn't earned his way to a closer relationship with God. Something was missing.

And so it was on 21 May 1738 in London, at the house of a man called John Bray, that Charles Wesley suddenly understood and then encountered the grace of God and the love, forgiveness and joy that followed from just giving in and letting God take over.

3 days later his brother John experienced the same, and the impact of this changed the whole of Britain.

And if we want to know how Charles felt about this, then today's hymn tells it all, written just after this experience it shows how his black and white world of duty and obligation has been transformed into the technicolour of relationship and love, and that's why he can say. *"My chains fell off, my heart was free, I rose, went forth, and followed Thee"*

So what about you and me? Can we say those words with the same conviction as Charles, how do we respond to all that God has done for us?

Should we, like the younger Charles Wesley try to earn God's acceptance through religious observance?

Or should we follow the Charles Wesley of today's hymn, and simply receive the gift held out to us by God. Accepting that we don't have to DO anything to earn God's love, because everything has already been DONE by Jesus.

3 days ago, we briefly reflected how Christianity is different from any other religion, because it gives us no role in our own salvation other than to say "thank you".

But I think, if we are honest, even if we agree with that in principle, in today's culture it can be hard for us to completely embrace. We are so engrained with a strong work ethic... we have to earn money, earn respect, earn the chance to retire, that we can be suspicious of something given for free with no strings attached... and like the early Charles Wesley we then bring this thinking in to our approach to God.

The sad fact is, that if you ask most people, perhaps even those within the church, what Christianity is about, they will say it is about being good; going to church on Sundays, singing the right hymns, being kind to people, living a good life.

Or, if they are more cynical, they may say it is about being a goody-goody, a spoilsport – frowning on fun, judging others and arrogantly criticising everyone else's behaviour.

Both are so far from the truth because they place us, not Jesus, at the centre of our own salvation. They are at risk of turning our relationship with God into a sort of contract: He's done his bit in sending Jesus to die for us, now we just need to do our bit by being good if we are going to keep the prize.

But the Christian faith is the exact opposite It is not about what we can DO for God, it is all about what God has DONE for us.

Now of course that doesn't mean how we behave doesn't matter. Jesus talked a lot about how we should behave, how to lead a good life, what standards we should aim for.

BUT the motivation for this is so different. God is not pushing us into a certain level of behaviour through fear or guilt, rather our behaviour is simply a response to the love and grace we have received.

As is often the case, Shakespeare has a wonderful analogy. In the play Anthony and Cleopatra, Anthony describes his love for Egypt like this. He says "My heart was to thy rudder tied by th'strings".

For a Christian the desire to live a good life is not about being pushed by fear but being pulled by love, as if our hearts were tied by string to God, so that wherever He leads, our heart follows.

And isn't this so much better? The way of grace says everything has already been done by Jesus on the cross, there is nothing you or I can do to make it any better.

BUT the wonderful, good news of Christianity is that all you and I need to do is rely on Jesus. And with him we can be 100% sure, because he will never let us down.

It is Jesus who has made us good enough, the father has adopted us, we have become his children and that is why Charles Wesley could end his hymn so positively and confidently:

"No condemnation now I dread...[I'm] clothed in righteousness Divine, Bold I approach the eternal throne and claim the crown, through Christ my own"

Because of what Jesus has done you and I can approach God with confidence.

Confident not in ourselves or what we've done but confident in God and what he has done

Confident that if we give him our life it will be safe in his hands both now and for eternity.

Closing Prayer

Maybe, having listened to Hymns We Love, you feel you would like to turn afresh to God and place your life safely in His hands.

If you would like to do that, for the first or even the thousandth time – (Pope Francis talks about us receiving the love of Christ afresh every day) - you can be confident that God is listening, that he will forgive and that your life will be safe in his hands both now and for eternity.

And if you would like to do that, please feel free to pray the following prayer; I will pause after each line so you can repeat it yourself, if and only if, you would like to do so:

My Lord and my God

Thank you that you made me and you love me.

Thank you that this love and acceptance isn't based on my goodness but on the goodness of Jesus.

I ask for your forgiveness for the times I have lived away from your ways.

Thank you for the love that you have shown me in Jesus.

Today I want to receive that in a fresh way.

Thank you for your amazing gift of eternal life.

I give my life to you and would love you to be my Lord.

Please come and live your life in me by the power of your Holy Spirit.

Thank you.

These things I pray in Jesus' Name.

Amen