

## Singing With Charlie

### **1 Chronicles 16:23-34**

Sing to the Lord, all the earth. Tell of his salvation from day to day. Declare his glory among the nations, his marvelous works among all the peoples. For great is the Lord, and greatly to be praised; he is to be revered above all gods. For all the gods of the peoples are idols, but the Lord made the heavens. Honor and majesty are before him; strength and joy are in his place. Ascribe to the Lord, O families of the peoples, ascribe to the Lord glory and strength. Ascribe to the Lord the glory due his name; bring an offering, and come before him. Worship the Lord in holy splendor; tremble before him, all the earth. The world is firmly established; it shall never be moved. Let the heavens be glad, and let the earth rejoice, and let them say among the nations, "The Lord is king!" Let the sea roar, and all that fills it; let the field exult, and everything in it. Then shall the trees of the forest sing for joy before the Lord, for he comes to judge the earth. O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good; for his steadfast love endures forever.

The Methodist movement began in England in the 1700s. John Wesley is credited with starting the movement at Oxford University in 1729, but he never would have gotten things started without his younger brother Charles.

John had earned his degree at Oxford, but once ordained a priest began working in a church. He later returned to Oxford as an elected fellow. By that time, Charles had only just come to the university as an undergraduate student. John was frustrated with the general lack of piety in the whole school, but especially among his own brother and his friends. So John took it upon himself to gather Charles and his friends together in order to better study and practice their faith. Known as The Holy Club, this was the first expression of the Methodist movement.

Many people know that John travelled to the Georgia colony to bring a greater sense of holy living to the early settlers, and to evangelize the Native Americans. But fewer people know that Charles came with him. In fact, Charles was the secretary to the colony's founder, James Oglethorpe. For very different reasons, neither John nor Charles stayed long in Georgia.

When they returned to England, Methodism as a recognizable movement really took off. Although both men preached and wrote hymns, but today we remember John for his preaching and Charles for his hymns. If you take a look in our hymnal, there are four songs by John – but

all of them are either translations or hymns that John simply revised. On the other hand, we have 59 hymns by Charles, all of them original. Charles was a prolific writer, composing over 6,500 hymns in his lifetime.

Of course, he didn't just write lots of hymns. He also wrote lots of verses for each hymn. Take out your hymnals and turn to page 58. This may not look familiar until you get down to the 7<sup>th</sup> stanza: *O for a thousand tongues to sing...* Charles wrote this song on the 11<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the moment when he felt he really knew and understood God's love for him. This song is long, but it's also intensely personal for him. So if you flip back one page to number 57, you'll see that the version we sing includes just the verses that fit most people's lives. Because this song is so identified with Methodism, and in fact is almost like our alma mater or theme song, it is traditionally listed as the first hymn in every Methodist hymnal. Let's go ahead and sing the first verse together now.

Though some of his hymns were based on personal experiences, generally the hymns expressed Methodist thinking and beliefs. Charles wrote these words, but he rarely wrote the music. In fact, John and Charles wanted so much to reach the poor, working class people the church had forgotten that they picked music they thought would speak to those people. So often they took the music from a popular bar song, then changed the words to reflect their theology. People were attracted by the familiar music, but their hearts were changed by the words.

One of the things Charles wrote about most often was the concept of God's grace. John preached that grace came in three stages. First, we celebrate prevenient, or pre-existing, grace. This is the grace we see as God's unconditional love for us, before we even know or care that there is a God. Second, we choose justifying grace. You can't avoid God's love, but you can avoid forgiveness. We have to accept and ask for justifying grace. This is the grace we celebrate

in the waters of baptism, welcoming us into God's family. But we know that even after we choose baptism, we continue to sin. So then we can receive sanctifying or perfecting grace, the grace that continues to forgive us as we continue to repent.

Charles wrote some beautiful hymns to help make this complex and nuanced theology something that can resonate easily with our hearts and souls. To understand prevenient grace, and the idea that God's love and salvation are available to all, let's sing the first verse of hymn 339, Come, Sinners, to the Gospel Feast.

To understand justifying grace, let's turn to page 372, How Can We Sinners Know. Here Charles helps us see how faith and forgiveness are tied together. Let's sing verses 1 and 3.

Finally, to help us understand perfecting grace, let's look at hymn 384, Love Divine, All Loves Excelling. In verse 2, Charles writes, "take away our bent to sinning." Even though we have faith, we know we continue to sin. He also writes, "end of faith as its beginning." When we first come to faith, or when we first have that moment of feeling God's love and forgiveness for us, we tend to feel greatly empowered. Our faith and love for God are strong. But it takes a lot of energy to keep that up, so Charles here is praying that even though life can be hard and can give us temptation, we might live up to the faith we had at the beginning. So let's sing verses 2 and 3 of this song.

If nothing else, John and Charles were very practical in how they understood faith. They realized that people who had great faith would have moments of doubt. They saw that people could perform great works in God's name, yet the next day be caught in the temptation of sin. If faith and grace were going to mean anything to people, it had to help them with their daily lives. In hymn 438, Charles talks about tying our faith to what we do with our lives. Let's sing the first verse of this hymn.

We could go on and on. Charles Wesley, along with the other great hymnist Isaac Watts, is considered to be one of the greatest influences on English hymn writing. Ever. Not too shabby for a guy whose older brother thought he needed to be less apathetic about his faith. Amen and amen.

**57, O For a Thousand Tongues to Sing (v. 1)**  
**339, Come, Sinners, to the Gospel Feast (v. 1)**  
**372, How Can We Sinners Know (v. 1, 3)**  
**384, Love Divine, All Loves Excelling (v. 2-3)**  
**438, Forth in Thy Name, O Lord (v. 1)**