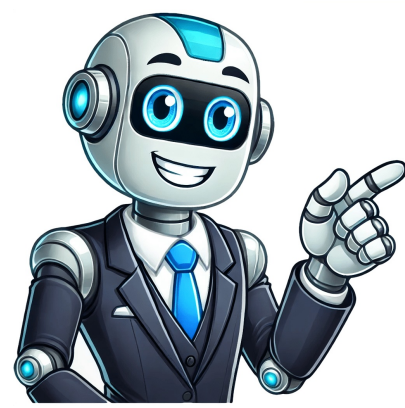


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Who were the people who wrote so many of hymns that have stood the test of time? Why did they write? How do they help us to 'sing the faith' still? Mark Woods goes in search of the stories behind the names.I've sung hymns as long as I can remember. I'm a cradle Christian, and the old songs of the Church burned themselves into my brain long before I was able to understand them. I loved the precision of the rhymes, the regular beat of the words and the oddities of expression.I was fascinated, too, by the names and dates at the bottom of each song. Who were the hymns written by? Some of the names were familiar from books of poetry and odd references in sermons, but I knew nothing about them. So over the years I found out what I could, and discovered that knowing something about the writers enriched the writing.And there are so many stories. Take Martin Rinkart for instance, the author of Now thank we all our God (SF 81). He ministered in the shadow of Germany's ruinous Thirty Years War, during which 30 per cent of the population died; in some areas it was as high as 75 per cent. Towards the end of the war his town was flooded with refugees, and famine and plague carried off thousands. Rinkart found himself conducting 50 funerals a day.The besieging Swedish army demanded a huge ransom to leave the city alone; Rinkart went out to plead with them for mercy and, impressed by his courage, they withdrew. The hymn - after all that blood and horror - was a thanksgiving for deliverance. Singing it in that light lifts it far above the routine.The Communist manifesto - inspiration for revolution and strife.Or there's that lovely carol. It came upon the midnight clear (SF 205). It was written by Edmund Hamilton Sears. An American, he was an oddity in being a Unitarian minister who believed in the divinity of Christ, but it's the date of the hymn that strikes us. It was written in 1849, the year after the Communist Manifesto was published and revolutions swept the old order from power in many European countries. America had just fought a war with Mexico that Sears believed was unjust, and he foresaw with dread one Civil War that lay just ahead. So he writes of the "two thousand years of wrong" and the "men of strife" with his eyes open and his heart sore, but he still believes. Then there's the lovely Just a Lam, without one plea (SF 55) a great evanaglistic hymn that's probably accompanied more souls to salvation than any other because of its use in Billy Graham campaigns. It was written by Charlotte Elliott in 1834 or '35. She was an invalid who struggled with depression and became a Christian through a conversation with a minister named Cesar Malan. He asked her at dinner if she were a Christian and she brushed him off irritably, but later said, "I want to come to Jesus but I don't know how." "Why not come just as you are?" he said. Later her brother, a minister, was organising a bazaar and she was frustrated at not being able to help. But Malan's words came back to her and she wrote "Just as I am" - "poor, wretched, blind", "tossed about with many a conflict" - and the hypnotic, repeated last line: "O Lamb of God, I come!" The repeated last line is hypnotic.The stories are wonderful, but they have survived because of the quality of the work, and because these hymns have fed us for decades and even centuries. They were written by people like us, but facing different issues in different worlds. The fact that they still speak is testimony to their own skill, but also to the power of God's Spirit and the communion of saints across the ages.Mark Woods is a Baptist minister and journalist. His book Salvation Songs: 70 great hymns and their stories is published by Verité at £9.99. Sacred music history is filled with hymns that have touched the hearts and souls of believers for generations. These hymns are more than just melodic expressions of faith; they carry stories of inspiration, reflection, and triumph. In this article, we will delve into the rich tapestry of sacred music history and explore the stories behind 10 inspiring hymns. From Martin Luther's stirring "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God" to Joseph M. Scriven's heartfelt "What A Friend, each hymn has a unique story to tell. Join us on this musical journey as we unravel the threads of history and discover the timeless messages within these beloved hymns. The Significance of Hymns in Worship Hymns play a crucial role in worship, acting as a powerful means of expressing faith, praise, and devotion. Through their rich lyrics and melodius tunes, hymns create a sacred atmosphere, inviting worshippers to connect with the divine. One of the significant aspects of hymns is their ability to convey deep theological truths in a poetic and accessible manner. The timeless messages within these hymns provide a framework for believers to reflect on their faith, contemplate spiritual truths, and find comfort in the presence of God. As hymns are sung congregationally, they foster a sense of unity and collective worship, allowing individuals to join their voices together in praise. "Hymns are like prayers set to music, allowing us to express our deepest emotions and desires to God," says Reverend John Davidson, a worship leader with over 20 years of experience. "They serve as a means of communication between the worshipper and the divine, offering a way to express gratitude, seek solace, or surrender in worship." Hymns also have a historical significance, carrying with them the stories and legacies of the composers who penned them. Each hymn weaves together personal experiences, biblical truths, and cultural influences, creating a tapestry of worship that spans across generations. As such, hymns not only connect us to the present moment of worship but also link us to the wider Christian tradition and the faithful who have gone before us. The Impact of Hymns in Worship Practices Within the context of worship practices, hymns serve several crucial purposes. First and foremost, they provide a vehicle for congregational participation, allowing worshippers to actively engage in the act of worship. When a congregation sings hymns together, it becomes a collective declaration of faith and a shared expression of devotion. Hymns also create a sense of familiarity and continuity, particularly within established worship traditions. Many hymns have withstood the test of time and have become beloved treasures that have been passed down from one generation to another. As a result, they evoke feelings of nostalgia, evoke memories, and create a deep connection between the present and the past. Furthermore, hymns can help to reinforce and teach theological concepts. The lyrics often contain deep theological truths and biblical references that can deepen understanding and faith. Through the repetition of key phrases and themes, hymns serve as a form of spiritual formation, shaping individuals' beliefs and perspectives. Overall, hymns hold a special place in the hearts and worship practices of believers, providing a means to express adoration, find solace, and deepen one's relationship with God. Whether through traditional hymns or contemporary worship songs inspired by hymnody, these musical expressions continue to play a vital role in the worship experiences of believers worldwide. Martin Luther's Impact: "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God" Martin Luther, a key figure in the Reformation, left a lasting impact on sacred music with his timeless hymn, "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God." This hymn, written in the early 16th century, became a rallying cry for Protestant Christians during a time of religious upheaval and theological change. Its powerful lyrics and majestic melody continue to inspire and resonate with believers around the world. The Story Behind the Hymn "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God" was born out of the tumultuous environment of the Protestant Reformation, as Martin Luther sought to communicate his theological beliefs and provide comfort to his fellow believers. Inspired by Psalm 46, Luther crafted lyrics that declared God's steadfastness and protection in the face of adversity. The hymn's bold expression of faith and confidence in God's sovereignty struck a chord with many, becoming a cornerstone of Protestant hymnody. "Luther's impact on sacred music extended beyond the composition of "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God." He also played a vital role in establishing congregational singing in the vernacular language, as opposed to the traditional Latin used in Catholic worship. By advocating for the use of German hymns, Luther enabled the congregation to actively participate in worship, fostering a deep sense of community and shared faith. The Enduring Influence Centuries later, "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God" continues to be sung and cherished by Christians worldwide. Its message of trust in God's strength and protection resonates in times of uncertainty and struggle. The hymn serves as a reminder of the unchanging nature of God and His faithfulness to His people. Through his hymnody and theological contributions, Martin Luther left an indelible mark on sacred music, shaping the way we worship and express our faith. "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God" stands as a testament to Luther's enduring influence and the power of music to unite believers in praise and worship. Robert Robinson's Reflection: "Come Thou Fount Of Every Blessing" Robert Robinson's heartfelt composition, "Come Thou Fount Of Every Blessing," continues to resonate with believers, reflecting on the abundance of God's blessings in our lives. The hymn, written in the 18th century, showcases Robinson's deep gratitude for the grace and mercy he received from God. The hymn's powerful lyrics, such as "Tune my heart to sing Thy grace" and "Streams of mercy, never ceasing," remind believers of their unwavering faith in God's love and provide a heartfelt plea for His continuous guidance and strength. Through these words, Robinson expresses his longing to be filled with the joy and peace that come from a close relationship with God. Robinson's composition has left a lasting impact, inspiring generations of believers to seek a deeper connection with their faith. The hymn's timeless message serves as a reminder of the infinite blessings that God bestows upon His people and encourages them to acknowledge His constant presence in their lives. Reflecting on the Lyrics: "Come Thou Fount Of Every Blessing" Tune my heart to sing Thy grace; Streams of mercy, never ceasing, Call for songs of loudest praise. Teach me some melodious sonnet Sung by flaming tongues above. Praise the mount! I'm fixed upon it, Mount of Thy redeeming love. In these verses, Robinson's poetic mastery shines through. His use of vivid imagery, such as "streams of mercy" and "mount of Thy redeeming love," paints a beautiful picture of the abundant blessings and redemptive power of God. Through his lyrics, Robinson invites believers to join in the joyous praise of God's grace and mercy. "Come Thou Fount Of Every Blessing" serves as a timeless reminder for believers to reflect on the countless blessings they have received and to express their thankfulness and love to God. 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In the face of challenges and trials, "Nearer My God To Thee" serves as a heartfelt plea to be near God, seeking solace, guidance, and strength in His presence. "Nearer My God To Thee" resonates with believers across generations, offering comfort and reassurance. The hymn's timeless melody and powerful lyrics serve as a reminder that no matter the challenges we face, we can find comfort and strength in God's love. The hymn, written in the 18th century, showcases Robinson's deep gratitude for the grace and mercy he received from God. The hymn's powerful lyrics, such as "Tune my heart to sing Thy grace" and "Streams of mercy, never ceasing," remind believers of their unwavering faith in God's love and provide a heartfelt plea for His continuous guidance and strength. Through these words, Robinson expresses his longing to be filled with the joy and peace that come from a close relationship with God. 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In the face of challenges and trials, "Nearer My God To Thee" serves as a heartfelt plea to be near God, seeking solace, guidance, and strength in His presence. "Nearer My God To Thee" resonates with believers across generations, offering comfort and reassurance. The hymn's timeless melody and powerful lyrics serve as a reminder that no matter the challenges we face, we can find comfort and strength in God's love. The hymn, written in the 18th century, showcases Robinson's deep gratitude for the grace and mercy he received from God. The hymn's powerful lyrics, such as "Tune my heart to sing Thy grace" and "Streams of mercy, never ceasing," remind believers of their unwavering faith in God's love and provide a heartfelt plea for His continuous guidance and strength. Through these words, Robinson expresses his longing to be filled with the joy and peace that come from a close relationship with God. Robinson's composition has left a lasting impact, inspiring generations of believers to seek a deeper connection with their faith. The hymn's timeless message serves as a reminder of the infinite blessings that God bestows upon His people and encourages them to acknowledge His constant presence in their lives. Reflecting on the Lyrics: "Come Thou Fount Of Every Blessing" Tune my heart to sing Thy grace; Streams of mercy, never ceasing, Call for songs of loudest praise. Teach me some melodious sonnet Sung by flaming tongues above. Praise the mount! I'm fixed upon it, Mount of Thy redeeming love. In these verses, Robinson's poetic mastery shines through. His use of vivid imagery, such as "streams of mercy" and "mount of Thy redeeming love," paints a beautiful picture of the abundant blessings and redemptive power of God. Through his lyrics, Robinson invites believers to join in the joyous praise of God's grace and mercy. 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Finding Comfort in Lina Sandell's "Day By Day" Lina Sandell's hymn "Day By Day" is also characterized by a simple yet powerful melody that resonates with listeners. The combination of the lyrics and the melody creates an atmosphere of trust and assurance, allowing believers to find solace and peace in God's faithful presence. This hymn has stood the test of time and continues to be sung in churches and gatherings around the world, providing solace and assurance in times of uncertainty. With its heartfelt lyrics and gentle melody, "Day By Day" encourages individuals to trust in God's faithfulness and seek comfort in His steadfast love. The hymn's poignant words, "Day by day, and with each passing moment, strength I find, to meet my trials here," remind us that God's grace is sufficient to carry us through every trial we face. As we sing the verses of "Day By Day," we are reminded of the eternal truth that our Heavenly Father is always with us, guiding us through life's ups and downs. The hymn's chorus, "Every day, every step I take, every moment, Lord, keep me near," serves as a prayerful plea for God's presence and guidance in our daily lives. Through these powerful words, we are encouraged to find comfort and strength in knowing that we are never alone on our journey. Embracing God's Sufficiency Lina Sandell's "Day By Day" beautifully encapsulates the essence of embracing God's sufficiency in all circumstances. It serves as a reminder that even in the darkest moments, we can find reassurance and peace in His unwavering love. Through its timeless message and soothing melody, this hymn continues to bring comfort and hope to countless hearts, allowing believers to trust in God's provision and grace each day. Thomas Chisholm's Proclamation: "Great Is Thy Faithfulness" Through the hymn "Great Is Thy Faithfulness," Thomas Chisholm beautifully captures the unwavering nature of God's faithfulness, inspiring believers to trust in Him without fail. The heartfelt lyrics of this hymn remind us of God's constancy and goodness, even in the midst of life's challenges. Chisholm writes, "Great is Thy Faithfulness, O God, Thy Father, There is no shadow of death," reminding us that God's love and faithfulness are constant, providing us with a powerful reminder that His love never leaves us or forsakes us. In addition to its lyrical beauty, "Great Thy Faithfulness" is also characterized by a simple yet powerful melody that resonates with listeners. The combination of the lyrics and the melody creates an atmosphere of trust and assurance, allowing believers to find solace and peace in God's faithful presence. This hymn has stood the test of time and continues to be sung in churches and gatherings around the world. Its enduring popularity speaks to its ability to connect with the hearts of believers, reminding them of God's faithfulness throughout history and in their personal lives. 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Katherine Hankey's hymn, "I Love To Tell The Story," stands as a testament to the enduring power of the Gospel message. Its timeless lyrics inspire believers to share the story of Jesus and His love with the world, spreading hope, joy, and redemption to all who listen. Horatio G. Spafford's Journey: "It Is Well With My Soul" Horatio G. Spafford's Journey: "It Is Well With My Soul" Horatio G. Spafford's hymn, "It Is Well With My Soul," stands as a testament to the unwavering faith and peace that can be found in the midst of profound loss and grief. Spafford, a successful businessman, experienced a devastating loss when his four-year-old daughter, Elsie, drowned in a shipwreck. The tragedy left him in a state of despair, but his faith in God's sovereignty remained unshaken. He wrote the hymn as a reflection of his journey through grief and his ultimate finding of peace and hope. 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