

O for a Thousand Tongues

~Other Speakers G-L: Hymn Stories:

Author --Charles Wesley, 1707-1788
Composer --Carl G. Glaser, 1784-1829
Tune Name --"Azmon"

"Let every thing that hath breath praise the Lord. Praise ye the Lord." Psalm 150:6

It is generally agreed that Isaac Watts and Charles Wesley have been the two most influential writers of English hymnody to date. Following the new metrical psalmody introduced by Watts, the eighteenth-century Christian church was ready for the more warm, experiential hymns of Charles Wesley. God providentially raised Charles Wesley up to take the harp of Watts when the older poet laid it down and thus kept the church's song vibrant.

John and Charles Wesley, while students at Oxford University, formed a religious "Holy Club" because of their dissatisfaction with the spiritual lethargy at the school. As a result of their methodical habits of living and studying, they were jokingly called "methodists" by their fellow students. Upon graduation these young brothers were sent to America by the Anglican Church to help stabilize the religious climate of the Georgia Colonies and to evangelize the Indians.

On board ship as they crossed the Atlantic, the Wesley brothers came into contact with a group of German Moravians, a small evangelical group long characterized by missionary concern and enthusiastic hymn singing. The spiritual depth of these believers soon became evident during a raging storm. The following account is taken from Wesley's journal, January 25, 1736:

"In the midst of the Psalm wherewith their service began, the sea broke over, split the main sail in pieces, covered the ship and poured in between the decks.... A terrible screaming began among the English. The Moravians looked up, and without intermission calmly sang on, I asked one of them afterwards, 'Were you not afraid?' He answered, 'Thank God, no!'"

John Wesley was so impressed with these people that he eventually made a detailed study of the hymnal used in their home church in Herrnhut, Germany. Soon he introduced a number of English translations of these Moravian hymns into the Anglican services. Between 1737 and 1786 the Wesleys published between them sixty-three hymnals, with many hymns of Moravian background.

Following a short and unsuccessful ministry in America, the disillusioned Wesleys returned to England, where once again they came under the influence of a group of devout Moravian believers meeting in Aldersgate, London. In May, 1738, both of these brothers had a spiritual heart-warming experience, realizing that though they had been zealous in the Church's ministry, neither had ever personally accepted Christ as Savior nor had known the joy of their religious faith as did their Moravian friends. From that time the Wesleys' ministry took on a new dimension and power.

Both John and Charles were endued with an indefatigable spirit, usually working fifteen to eighteen hours each day. It is estimated that they traveled a quarter of a million miles throughout Great Britain, mostly on horseback, while conducting more than 40,000 public services. Charles alone wrote no less than 6,500 hymn texts, with hardly a day or an experience passing without its crystallization into verse.

"O For a Thousand Tongues" was written in 1749 on the occasion of Charles's eleventh anniversary of his own Aldersgate conversion experience. It is thought to have been inspired by a chance remark by Peter Bohler, an influential Moravian leader, who exclaimed, "Had I a thousand tongues, I would praise Christ Jesus with all of them." The hymn originally had nineteen stanzas and when published was entitled, "For the Anniversary Day of One's Conversion." Most of the verses, no longer used, dealt in a very personal way with Wesley's own conversion experience. For example, "I felt my Lord's atoning blood close to my soul applied Me, me He loved--the Son of God--for me, for me He died."

Charles Wesley died on March 29, 1788, having spent over fifty years in the service of the Lord he loved so intimately and served so effectively. Even as he lay on his death bed, it is said that he dictated a final hymn of praise to his wife.

Other hymns by Charles Wesley include "Christ the Lord Is Risen Today" (No. 13), "Jesus, Lover of My Soul" (No. 45), "A Charge to Keep I Have" (101 More Hymn Stories, No. 1), "Depth of Mercy" (ibid., No. 20), and "Hark!

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The Herald Angels Sing" (ibid., No. 31).