

The “Sweet Singing” Hymnist of God

By Maria Madsen

When thinking of the great ministries of John Wesley in the eighteenth century, most readers overlook the work of his brother Charles Wesley, who, if not more so than John, had a most fruitful and Godly ministry through the love of Christ.

On December 18, 1707, Charles was born to Samuel and Susanna Wesley in Epworth, England. He was the eighteenth child and youngest son in the Wesley family of nineteen. He grew up under the strict but loving care of his mother Susanna. Though times were tough and financial trouble hindered the large family, Susanna raised her children diligently, providing them with an early knowledge of the Bible. Each morning, she gathered her ten surviving children to read Scripture and sing songs together. Many were surprised at her exceedingly patient way and her well-behaved family.

From an early age, Charles enjoyed singing and music. He was also very talented in writing poetry, a gift passed down from his father. He was homeschooled by his mother until he was eight years old. Then, he was sent to Westminster School, where he excelled in his studies under his oldest brother Samuel's tutoring. When he was nineteen, he went to Christ Church College in Oxford. His brother John was also in a college in Oxford, and they visited each other often.

At this time, John became quite serious about seeking to live a spiritual life. Charles, on the other hand, was carefree and indifferent, but he soon “became deeply concerned for the salvation of his soul” (Jackson, pg. 30). He and John began doing good deeds for God to earn their salvation, for they did not fully understand how to receive the salvation that comes through Jesus Christ and His sacrifice for the forgiveness of sins. They strove to please God by works, which was Mr. Law's system of belief, a writer whose texts they read for guidance. Charles, John, and their friends began to meet together to pray, read the Bible, and to grow in their understanding of God. Their group was called the “Holy Club,” and they were named the “Methodists” by their college classmates. One “Methodist” in their group was the famous preacher George Whitefield, who was one of Charles' close friends.

Charles and John spent their young years learning and living for God. They practiced sharing the love of God with others and worked in the church.

A year after their father's death in April of 1735, John and Charles received the opportunity to preach to the Indians and emigrants who had set up a new colony in Georgia, America. The brothers sailed to America to begin their first missions work.

But Charles' way of teaching was not yet perfected, and he gained the peoples' dislike because of his temper and strict teaching, which was forthright and unbecoming to the people who had never heard the Word of God before. They planned how to get rid of him, and Charles was almost shot a few times, but God shielded him. He was accused of trying to start a mutiny among the colonists, but John saved him. Charles fell deathly ill and was without any comfort for some time. The mission work he had tried desperately to succeed in failed.

He returned to England without his brother, vastly disappointed and depressed. He tried to find the holiness of a righteous life with God, but he felt empty inside. He realized that something was wrong as his efforts to please God and stop sinning seemed hopeless. In the months after leaving Georgia, Charles was confused and doubtful that he would ever find what he was seeking. He had experienced peace when he first felt zeal for God, but that peace had disappeared. Now he felt only despair and hopelessness. The illnesses he had often dealt with came upon him again, and the attacks of intense pain in his side returned. Several times, Charles

was in such agony that he felt about to die, but each time God pulled him through. In time, John came back to England with the same empty feeling. Together, the brothers searched for answers.

During one of Charles' periods of gloom, he wrote this entry in his journal: "I began my twenty-seventh year in a murmuring, discontented spirit; reading over and over the third of Job." A month later he wrote, "I called upon Mrs. Pendarris, while she was reading a letter of my being dead. Happy for me, had the news been true! What a world of misery would it save me!" (Jackson, pg. 100)

But hope was not lost. A man named Peter Boehler, who was a Moravian Christian, became a dear friend of the Wesley brothers, and he shared the true message of salvation to them. It took time for Charles and John to understand this new doctrine. Boehler was a strong, young Christian, and he continued to patiently explain to them the free gift of forgiveness through the following years.

Finally, on May 21, 1738, God opened Charles' heart to the salvation message, and he believed! The past years were full of doubt and hopeless wondering, but then God sent His Holy Spirit, and Charles received the perfect peace of knowing that Jesus Christ had saved him through His blood. He understood that salvation was not by good deeds to win oneself to God but that Christ died to forgive sinners. What a feeling of joy, hope, love, and peace Charles felt! He was saved for eternity!

John was filled with joy for his brother, and a few days later, Christ became his Savior, too. Charles and John had found the truth they had been seeking: Jesus Christ. Later, Charles wrote, "I now found myself at peace with God, and rejoiced in hope of loving Christ...I saw that by faith I stood, by the continual support of faith...I went to bed still sensible of my own weakness...yet confident of Christ's protection"(Clifford). He also wrote, "I began a hymn upon my conversion" (Morgan, pg. 45). Which hymn he meant is unknown, but perhaps he referred to his hymn "And Can It Be." The fourth verse especially may speak of his powerful conversion:

Long my imprison'd spirit lay
Fast bound in sin and nature's night;
Thine eye diffused a quick'ning ray;
I woke; the dungeon flamed with light;
My chains fell off, my heart set free,
I rose, went forth, and follow'd thee.
(Jackson, pg. 124)

Charles' life was changed forever. He left behind his temper and started to preach the gospel. He and John were filled with the love of Christ, and they demonstrated this love through their work in the church and to others. Charles became powerful in prayer and preaching, bringing many to Christ. He especially found pleasure in preaching and caring for the poor. He spent countless hours writing beautiful poetry and hymns. His amazing preaching, either from the pulpit or the tip of his pen, vividly described Christ's love, forgiveness, and salvation. Wherever he was, he always created new songs in his mind. Some of his most well-known hymns include, "O, For a Thousand Tongues to Sing"; "Jesus, The Sinner's Friend"; "Hark! The Herald Angels Sing"; "Christ The Lord Is Risen Today"; and "Lo, He Comes With Clouds Descending." Over 6,000 of his hymns have benefited mankind everywhere, and many stories are told how his hymns brought comfort and peace to persecuted Christians.

One of Charles' fruitful ministries was to visit the criminals in Newgate Prison. In Charles'

day, crime was high, and almost every day thieves or murderers were sentenced to the gallows. Even poor women and children who committed petty crimes were killed as punishment. Charles spent hours being locked up with the prisoners, consoling and sharing the gospel with those who were condemned to die. Most of them were eager to be saved and became confident in going to Jesus. Though Charles was at first skeptical about them being saved at the very end of their sinful lives, the Holy Spirit assured him that each one who believed would be with God.

Charles took the gospel to Ireland and Wales, where, in the latter country, he met and courted Sarah Gwynne. On April 8, 1749, Charles and Sarah were married in Brecon, Wales. Their marriage was one of love and devotion. Sarah, whom Charles affectionately called his “dear Sally,” lovingly supported her husband through his ministry work. They had eight children, of whom only three lived past infancy: Charles Jr., Samuel, and Sarah. They settled down in Bristol, England, where Charles continued in his work and published his hymns and poetry at times for their income. Charles never ceased to write the words of his heart, help his brother, and labor for the people of England. He took many opportunities to pray for, baptize, and counsel new Christians and strengthen the Methodist churches. God was with him everywhere he went and protected him from those who persecuted him. He was safely led by God through riots and angry mobs. Countless times, his life was spared, but because of his weak body and his laborious and tiring work, Charles suffered many times from fever, exhaustion, and depression. But through it all, he remained cheerful and enthusiastic in serving the Lord.

Finally, at the close of 81 years, Charles fell ill with weakness for the last time. In the joy of soon being with the Lord, Charles dictated his last hymn to his dear Sally:

In age and feebleness extreme,
Who shall a sinful worm redeem?
Jesus, my only hope Thou art,
Strength of my failing flesh and heart,
O, could I catch a smile from Thee,
And drop into eternity! (Clifford)

About a week later on March 29, 1788, Charles died peacefully in his home in Marylebone, London. His family and friends greatly missed him, for they had respected and cherished him as a dear husband, father, and brother in Christ. A memorial was set up in his honor, but they knew that he was in the presence of the Lord, whom he had served wholeheartedly and had looked forward to seeing face-to-face.

Throughout his life, Charles Wesley brought hundreds upon thousands of people to the Lord through his powerful preaching, his poetry, and most importantly, his heart-touching hymns. His life and ministry were full of countless miracles and amazing stories of God’s work through him. His powerful influence on the people of Europe along with John’s fine work also created the Wesleyan Revival, which turned the sinful souls of England back to God. And because of all that he did through life and love in the Lord Jesus Christ, he will receive many rewards as he enjoys his free gift of eternal life in an eternal home with the Lord, where he will continue to sing praises to His Savior. Let us all try to be as devoted to God through our faith and as loving to all in our deeds as Charles Wesley was.

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