

“COME, THOU FOUNT OF EVERY BLESSING”

HYMN HISTORY

COMPOSITION

- **Text** – Robert Robinson, 1735-1790
- **Tune** – Unknown
- **American Publisher** – John Wyeth, 1770–1858

BIOGRAPHY OF ROBERT ROBINSON

Early Years

- Born 1735 in Norfolk, Eng., into a poor, irreligious family.
- His father wandered from home when Robert was 8 and died within a few years.
- His maternal grandfather disowned his daughter for marrying so lowly, leaving Robert a tiny early inheritance (≈ \$100).
- An uncle paid for him to go to a church school until age 13.
- His mother sent him to London at age 14 to apprentice as a barber. His mentor complained he was often caught reading.

Conversion

- As a teen in London, Robert joined a gang and entered into a life of drunkenness and debauchery.
- At age 17 he and his colleagues were out drinking and decided to have fun at others' expense.
 - Finding a Gypsy fortune teller, they plied her with drinks and then asked her to reveal their futures.
 - Their aim was to mock her silly behavior, but Robert was unsettled by her comments.
- Later, they visited the tabernacle where George Whitefield was preaching so they might heckle him & “the poor Methodists.”
 - But Whitefield's sermon pierced his heart.
 - Whitefield preached Mt 3:7, “O generation of vipers, who hath warned you to flee from the wrath to come?”
 - Whitefield exclaimed, “Oh, my hearers! The wrath to come! The wrath to come!”
- Robert did not yet trust Christ, but God had begun a work.

- Robert was haunted by Whitfield's words for 3 years until finally making sure his salvation in 1755 at age 20.
 - He always looked back to the night he heard Whitefield preach as the beginning of his salvation.
 - He wrote (in Latin) on a blank page in a book in his library a record of his conversion. It translates:

"Robert, son of Michael and Marise Robinson. Born in Swaffham, county of Norfolk, on Saturday, Sept. 27, 1735. Reborn on Saturday, May 24, 1752, through the powerful preaching of George Whitefield. I found full and free forgiveness through the precious blood of Jesus Christ, Tuesday, December 10, 1755, to whom be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen."

NOTE: By marking the date of his conversion so early, Robinson reflects a controversial version of Calvinistic belief that says regeneration may precede faith by a considerable amount of time.

Ministry

- Robinson was saved into Calvinistic Methodist (ala Whitefield), and afterward began considering ministry.
- He lived in London until he finished his apprenticeship.
- At 22, he moved to an uncle's farm in Suffolk, and there began to practice preaching in the open air, often to no one.
 - But people took notice and sometimes gathered to listen.
 - James Wheatly, who ran the local Methodist tabernacle, invited him to preach there where he was warmly received.
- Though saved into Methodism, Robinson reconsidered his understanding of baptism from a biblical perspective.
- In 1758, age 23, he began a Congregational church in Norwich.
- In 1759, he moved to Cambridge and became a Baptist.
 - He served first as a Lecturer at Stone Yard Baptist Chapel (aka, St. Andrews Street Baptist Church).
 - In 1762 he became the pastor, a position he would hold until his death in 1790.
 - In 1764 his congregation constructed a new building as they became a congregation of over 1,000 souls.
- He became known as a Baptist theologian, writing many theological works as well as several hymns.

Controversy

- Robinson was known for his engagement with Unitarians, but in all his sermons and writings, even at the end of his life, he affirmed the Trinity and Christ's deity.
- His cordial affiliations with Unitarians and Socinians (a pocket of whom he tolerated in his church) clouded the reputation of his orthodoxy.
- Robinson died at age 54 after traveling to Birmingham to preach for noted Unitarian pastor, Dr. Joseph Priestly.
 - Priestly was a famous scientist, discoverer, inventor, philosopher, political activist, and theologian.
 - Robinson & Priestly both advocated for abolition and human rights. They both approved of the American and French Revolutions.
 - Priestly preached Robinson's funeral and claimed that Robinson had converted to Unitarianism.
- It appears that Robinson did not actually become Unitarian.
 - It was common in this era for Unitarians to claim well-known adherents (cf. the Isaac Watts story).
 - In 1788, Robinson was accused of being Unitarian and preached a strong sermon in rebuttal of it.
- Several things led to this confusing situation, including:
 - Robinson's “no creed but Christ” approach to sorting out controversies, common amongst many English Dissenters.
 - The tragedy of his daughter's death at age 17 in the year 1787, a grief from which he never fully recovered.
 - His financial woes which brought him to the brink of going to debtor's prison.
 - Health troubles and disturbing signs of mental instability; his sermons became incoherent in his latter years. (This led his church to begin removing him from office, a process that was cut short by his unexpected demise.)

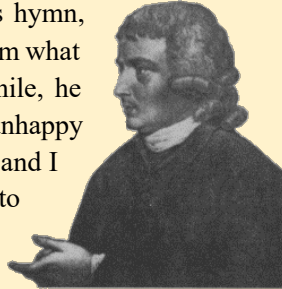
HYMN BACKGROUND

- Written in 1757 when he was only 22 years old while serving at the Calvinist Methodist Chapel in Suffolk.
- Composed to accompany a sermon he prepared to preach on Pentecost Sunday (7 weeks after Easter).

- It was printed the next year by James Wheatly who ran the Tabernacle, and it quickly circulated amongst the Methodists.
- The hymn was also popularized by Lady Huntington (Selina Hastings)—so much so she was often mistaken as its author.

THE LEGEND OF THE CARRIAGE RIDE

A popular legend tells of a painful conversation Robinson had with a carriage passenger in the dark later years of his life. Supposedly she was reading a hymnal and was singing his hymn, not knowing he was the author. She asked him what he thought of it. After evading it for a while, he supposedly said, “Madam, I am the poor unhappy man who wrote that hymn many years ago, and I would give a thousand worlds if I had them, to enjoy the feelings I had then.” This gripping tale has never been firmly corroborated.



- The tune used most in America is *Nettleton*, named after the early 19th century evangelist, Asahel Nettleton.
 - The melody may be a folk tune.
 - The song was often sung with an added revival chorus, and it was first published in 1813 by John Wyeth.
- The most common UK tune is *Normandy*.

RECORDINGS



Nettleton



Normandy

ORIGINAL TEXT

Stanza 1

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.

Stanza 2

**Sorr’wing I shall be in spirit, Till released from flesh and sin,
Yet from what I do inherit, Here Thy praises I’ll begin;**
Here I raise my Ebenezer—Hither by Thy help I’m come;
And I hope, by Thy good pleasure, Safely to arrive at home.

Stanza 3

Jesus sought me when a stranger, Wandering from the fold of God;
He, to rescue me from danger, Interposed His precious blood;
**How His kindness yet pursues me Mortal tongue can never tell,
Clothed in flesh, till death shall loose me I cannot proclaim it well.**

Stanza 4

O to grace how great a debtor Daily I’m constrained to be!
Let Thy goodness, like a fetter, Bind my wandering heart to Thee.
Prone to wander, Lord, I feel it, Prone to leave the God I love;
Here’s my heart, O take and seal it, Seal it for Thy courts above.

Stanza 5

O that day when freed from sinning, I shall see Thy lovely face;
Clothed then in blood washed linen How I’ll sing Thy sovereign grace;
Come, my Lord, no longer tarry, Take my ransomed soul away;
Send thine angels now to carry Me to realms of endless day.

EXPLICATION

Whole Song

- Most of the hymn is addressed as a prayer to God (the Father).
- Variations abound in most hymnals today.
 - **The first two lines of Stanza 2 and the last two lines of Stanza 3** are often omitted, with the remaining lines joined.
 - “Here I raise mine Ebenezer,” is often paraphrased.
 - “Interposed His precious blood” often is changed to, “bought me with His precious blood.”
 - Nazarene and other Holiness church hymnals often change, “Prone to wander” to “Let me know Thee in Thy fulness.”

Stanza 1

- God is beautifully addressed as “the Fount of every blessing” Who generates an unending flow of mercy.
- This motivates loud praise, a reference, in part, to the contemporary renewal of music in English worship.
- Much of stanza 1 asks that the worshipper’s praise be brought in “tune” with the constant praise of God in heaven.
- A “melodious sonnet sung by flaming tongues above” refers to the songs of seraphim (lit, “burning ones”) in heaven.
- The “mount” may allude to Mt. Zion or to Christ Himself.

Stanza 2

- The original opening line laments the menace of the ongoing presence of sin, but sorrow over sin is mingled with the joy of the inheritance of salvation sung about in line 2.
- The cryptic Phrase, “Here I raise mine Ebenezer—Hither by Thy help I’m come” borrows wording from 1 Sam 7:12.
 - Samuel erected a memorial, called “Ebenezer,” to commemorate Yahweh’s helping Israel against the Philistines.
 - The term “Ebenezer” is Hebrew for “stone of help.”
 - The stone is not the source of help but placed as a monument to commemorate God’s aid.
 - The worshipper’s song is likened to a monument of thanks.

Stanza 3

- Robinson’s own testimony of deliverance from debauchery is a fitting background to the testimony of the first line.
- The “danger” from which Christ’s blood did “rescue” him was the sure wrath of God which Whitfield warned about.
- The term “interposed” suggests a barrier placed between himself and God’s righteous wrath.
- The final (original) line laments that until his final glorification, he is unable to praise God as he ought.

Stanza 4

- Though the opening line has been criticized by some as a “debtor’s ethic,” the sentiment of loyal love is profound.
- The term “fetter” refers to a chain, but the bondage spoken of is one of goodness & love—the preservation of the saint.
- The worshipper confesses his tendency to wander and desires the Lord to seal his promise of commitment until he arrives in heaven’s courts.

Stanza 5

- This little-sung stanza anticipates the beatific vision when the believer is forever pure in God’s presence. 1 John 3:2
- The worshipper longs for the purer praise of heaven and asks God to hasten his arrival in God’s presence.
- This could be a request to “depart and be with Christ” (Phil 1:23) or for the Second Coming.